

At Honolulu parley

CIA played down US domino theory

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A key Johnson Administration military adviser had proposed in 1964 that tactical nuclear weapons would have to be deployed if Communist Chinese forces entered the ground war in Vietnam. Admiral Harry D. Felt, then the commander in chief of the Pacific forces, emphatically demanded also that commanders be given the freedom to use such weapons "as had been assumed under various plans."

This question, among others, was discussed among his top advisers at the Honolulu conference, June 1-2, 1964.

Following the meeting, President Johnson asked his advisers the basic question: "Would the rest of Southeast Asia necessarily fall if Laos and South Vietnam came under North Vietnamese control?"

On June 9, the Board of National Estimates of the Central Intelligence Agency, provided a response, stating:

"With the possible exception of Cambodia, it is likely that no nation in the area would quickly succumb to Communism as a result of the fall of Laos and South Vietnam. Furthermore, a continuation of the spread of Communism in the area would not be inexorable and any spread which did occur would take time — time in which the total situation might change in any number of ways unfavorable to the Communist cause."

These and other details are part of the on Vietnam study that was made for Defense Department.

The State Department approached the Honolulu conference "with a basic assumption," namely "our point of departure is and must be that we cannot accept the overrunning of southeast Asia by Hanoi and Peking."

Beyond this, the discussions "were intended to help clarify issues with respect to exerting pressures against North Vietnam." The joint Chiefs of Staff recommended that "the US should seek through military actions to accomplish destruction of the North Vietnamese will and capabilities as necessary to compel the Democratic Government of Vietnam to cease providing support to the insurgencies in South Vietnam and Laos."

LIMITED ACTION

However, the JCS went on to note that "some current thinking appears to dismiss the objective in favor of a lesser objective, one visualizing limited military action which, hopefully, would cause the North Vietnamese to decide to terminate their subversive support."

During discussions of the extent of new military action, Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge "argued in favor of attacks on north." He is reported to have stated "his conviction that most support for the Viet Cong would fade as soon as some 'counter-terrorism measures' were begun against DRV."

Discussions then turned to the desirability of obtaining a congressional resolution prior to wider US action. Lodge felt that it would not be necessary, since the US response would be on a "tit-for-tat" basis. But Defense Secretary McNamara, Rusk and CIA Director John McCone all argued in favor of the resolution.

Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, chairman of the Joint Chiefs, then raised "the final possibility" of Chinese involvement. Were that to occur, the allies would require "seven ground divisions."

"Secretary McNamara then went on to say that the possibility of major ground action also led to a serious question of having to use nuclear weapons at some point," the reports point out. "Admiral Felt responded emphatically that there was no possible way to hold off the Communists on the ground without the use of tactical nuclear weapons and that it was essential that the commanders be given freedom to use these as had been assumed under various plans," it added.

Gen. Taylor was "more doubtful as to the existence or at least to the degree of the nuclear weapon requirement."

"The point, the report concluded, 'was not really followed up.'"

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Hooray for the CIA

The Central Intelligence Agency comes out well in the documentation of the Vietnam war provided by *The New York Times*. Asked specifically in June, 1964, whether all of South-east Asia would go Communist if Laos and South Vietnam were captured, the CIA reported:

With the possible exception of Cambodia, it is likely that no nation in the area would quickly succumb to communism as a result of the fall of Laos and South Vietnam. Furthermore, a continuation of the spread of communism would not be inexorable, and any spread which did occur would take time—time in which the total situation might change in any number of ways unfavorable to the Communist cause.

That was an intelligent estimate provided by what is assumed to be our best intelligence agency in defense affairs. It may no longer be good: the devastation caused since 1964 might have had the effect of self-fulfilling the domino theory.

With hindsight, the country can greatly regret that its top leaders followed their hunch rather than the CIA estimate. Not too long ago the United States was playing ping-pong with the Communist Chinese, against whom it did not want to play dominoes. The domino theory was long the most popular basis offered for the Vietnam involvement. It was not then a good basis and there is some encouragement in finding that the CIA recognized it as such.